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Reassembling Scholarly Communications

Histories, Infrastructures, and Global Politics of Open Access

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OA Funding Provided By:

- Arcadia Fund
- Birkbeck, University of London

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding from Arcadia—a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/11885.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11885.001.0001)

24 Learned Societies, Humanities Publishing, and Scholarly Communication in the UK

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As documented by Aileen Fyfe's chapter in this book, *Philosophical Transactions*, described as "the world's first and longest-running scientific journal," was published in 1665, five years after the establishment of the Royal Society, which first licensed and then owned the title.¹ The communication and advancement of research through publication was deemed central to the Society's role from the outset. More than 350 years later, scholarly communication remains vitally important to the work, the standing, and increasingly the economic viability of learned societies and subject organizations across the sciences, humanities, and social sciences. Access at reduced or no charge to society publications—whether journals, edited texts or monographs—is viewed as one of the key benefits of society membership for individual researchers.² Most learned society websites have a prominent publications section, and special membership areas leave no doubt that this is an activity to be valued. These publications serve multiple, reinforcing purposes. They might be signifiers of belonging, either as an owner or a contributor; enticements to pay an annual member subscription; showcases for both the society and the discipline; sites of argumentation; forums for innovation, or conversely protest against change; or a means of subsidizing other society activity.

For most of the twentieth century there has been no need to question or perhaps really even to think about the role of the learned society as publisher, or these days more often publishing partner. However, in the last two decades the assumptions and "certainties" that underpinned this model have begun to be challenged by the development of the web, and by the demand for broader open access to what might once have been viewed as privileged knowledge that the web has both encouraged and enabled. And this challenge is a multifaceted one. It is perhaps most immediately an economic problem; this was certainly the concern that dominated early

discussions about the impact of open-access mandates on learned societies. As the money to be earned from scholarly publishing, especially in partnership with the large commercial entities that positioned themselves as “society publishers,” increased, so too did the dependence on income from this source. Organizations representing the humanities never enjoyed the publishing bonanza from which many of their counterparts in the sciences benefited, but the sums involved were sufficiently large to encourage what with hindsight begins to look like overreliance on a single source of income. The apparently sudden threat to this ecosystem posed by open access in particular caused, and continues to cause, great concern.³ If the income from publications was largely to be lost—and this was often the lens through which open access was viewed—how would a learned society continue to fund its work, to pay its staff, to stay in business? The initial alarm receded, but I suspect only because green open access came to be accommodated with relatively little disruption to the dominant subscription models.⁴

More interesting, and ultimately perhaps more difficult to address, are the cultural implications of these changes. Scholarly publishing is inextricably entangled with our understandings of academic rigor, reputation, and authority. There are explicit and implicit hierarchies, often impenetrable to those just embarking on their university careers, which center in particular on university presses and on the journals published in the name of learned societies. These hierarchies are in large part self-imposed, and consequently all the more persistent. In the UK, the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF)⁵ FAQs may include a very clear statement that “No sub-panel will make any use of journal Impact Factors, rankings, lists or the perceived standing of publishers in assessing the quality of research outputs,”⁶ but it is very difficult to persuade researchers, much less REF administrators in their universities, that this is really true. In general, scholars are liable to assume that judgments about quality will be made according to the criteria that they use themselves, where the publisher or journal becomes a proxy for quality and open access can become shorthand for “less rigorously peer reviewed.” In this context, learned societies become guardians of an established brand, with their imprimatur guaranteeing quality. There is little incentive to initiate change, and indeed preservation of the status quo may be viewed as an important responsibility for those involved in academic publishing. To do otherwise is to risk unmooring research from any markers of quality and value. At a time of ever-increasing publication,⁷

the argument that we need precisely these robust and well-trusted systems in place to help filter out the noise can seem very attractive indeed.

Change, however, is happening regardless, and it is incumbent on learned societies to mediate new developments in scholarly publishing, and in the broader culture of the academy, for their subject and disciplinary communities, as they have done so successfully in the past. There is an opportunity for bodies of this kind to offer different services for researchers, and to explore new ways of providing and articulating value. What are learned societies for in the early twenty-first century? Which communities do they serve, particularly as so many of them are registered charities with an obligation to look beyond their members and fellows? Scholarly communication can, and in my view should, remain at the heart of their activity, but it is possible to think imaginatively about everything that this might encompass.

The arguments against radical change are often financial ones. Learned societies do need to remain financially sound if they are to achieve anything at all, but this is not to say that the economics of their publishing programs should remain unscrutinized. Does it still make sense to derive substantial income from journals which are paid for at least twice over from membership fees and university library subscriptions, for example? And where this is the case, it becomes difficult to argue that access to publications is what is really driving society membership. There is another kind of value on offer here, which retains its attraction despite the open availability of a society's published outputs. Learned societies which are tackling head on the problems facing their disciplines, influencing policy so that it works for their professional cultures and practices, and helping researchers to investigate and benefit from new ways of communicating research stand a very good chance not just of surviving, but of thriving. They can begin to shape the future of academic publishing.

This is particularly the case with regard to open-access monograph publishing. Thanks to the consultation on the second REF published in December 2016, we know that the open access mandate that currently applies to journal articles and conference proceedings in the UK will be extended to books for the third REF in the mid-2020s.⁸ We do not yet know, however, what a fully open-access landscape for monographs might look like. But we do have between five and 10 years to think about what will most effectively serve the humanities, where book-based disciplines still predominate, and to experiment with new ways of publishing books.⁹ Experimentation can

be unsettling, for established and new researchers alike, and at a time of rapid change it can be exceptionally difficult to navigate a “safe” course. And there is undoubtedly risk involved in digital publishing. There is no commonly accepted business model for publishing open-access books, but there is already a degree of experimentation. Notable examples include Knowledge Unlatched, punctum books, Open Humanities Press, Open Book Publishers and OpenEdition, among others.¹⁰ In the coming years, many more different approaches will be adopted, and many new initiatives will spring up. Some will be led by publishers, some by libraries, some by scholars themselves—and some of them will inevitably fail. This is not the future that an author wants for their first book, even if open access will allow it to survive the demise of its publisher in multiple forms and places. You want your first book to be part of a growing portfolio of related titles that show how it complements and advances research in your chosen field. That is one reason for the continuing significance of book series, which are about more than ease of marketing. There will be anxiety about open-access books, some of it justified, some of it the result of misinformation, but all of it needing to be addressed—and that is where learned societies come in.

One interesting early intervention is that of the Royal Historical Society (RHS), which has taken the decision to close its long-running monograph series, *Studies in History*, and to launch a fresh open-access alternative, *New Historical Perspectives*. The series is aimed at early career researchers, within 10 years of completing the PhD, and is designed to make open access an option of first choice rather than last resort. With even the lowest book processing charges currently costing an author around £5,000 (approximately \$6,600), and fee waiver schemes likely to be heavily oversubscribed, publishing an open-access book seems simply out of the question for many humanities researchers. Developing a scheme that covers this cost, as part of the RHS's service for its subject community, makes open access possible.¹¹ There are still arguments to be made about authority, value, and the importance of impact and reach, but the initial, and often insurmountable, financial hurdle is overcome. The books, which will be published through the relaunched University of London Press, will take the familiar form of the PDF, supplemented by print-on-demand and ePub versions. There is not yet much in the way of digital experimentation. The goal is rather to embed open access within the publishing practices of early career historians, and this necessitates a degree of caution. There is nevertheless innovation: in

the partnership with a small university publisher and other learned societies; in the openness to a broad definition of the book, which includes not just monographs and edited collections but shorter works of 30,000–40,000 words; and in a peer review process that allows authors to workshop their book with leading researchers in their field. Once the series and the publishing platform are more established, there will be options to play with form, to incorporate data and other digital objects in the open-access book, and finally to think beyond the PDF. All of this becomes easier, and less frightening for researchers, if digital-first publication has been normalized within a discipline through the involvement and sponsorship of learned societies.

This is, of course, just a single example, in a single discipline. It might work for history, where the monograph continues to dominate the academic publishing environment and to determine career progression, but not be quite right for philosophy or classics. Other humanities disciplines will have more or less differing concerns and imperatives. The point is not the type of activity, but the fact that learned societies are beginning to seize the opportunity to rethink the ways in which they can support and develop scholarly communication. They can, as in this instance, provide financial assistance and new publishing opportunities. But they might equally seek to influence the use of bibliometrics to measure quality, provide guidance around ethical publishing practices, address questions of diversity at all stages of the publishing process, work together to explore the possible evolutions of peer review, or discuss how best to deal with research outputs of all kinds that have multiple authors. These are developments which are already affecting humanities researchers, but which they may have little or no capacity to influence. Their learned societies can speak for them and help to deliver change that builds on the best humanities practice. If bibliometrics are to become one measure for judging the quality of research, for example, then it is vital both that humanities citation is fully understood, and that robust data is collected for the full range of publications. If research in the digital humanities tends to produce more books and journal articles with multiple authors, then the roles of the various authors need to be explored and mechanisms established for recognizing their unique contributions. If altmetrics are to play a role in evaluation processes, the forums in which humanities researchers share their findings online and the networks that they use to engage with their colleagues and the wider public need to be investigated.

Learned societies can, if they choose, play an important role in the reshaping of scholarly communication for the twenty-first century. It may well be vital for their own survival that they do so. They do not, however, have to act alone. Many learned societies in the humanities are very small indeed and have to marshal and prioritize their limited resources carefully. They often draw heavily on the work of volunteer officers, who have their own paying jobs to keep them occupied and cannot afford to take on even more commitments. In this environment, consultation and collaboration become key. A group of learned societies working together is much better placed to influence policy, develop infrastructure, and effect change. Publishers' humanities catalogues, after all, have always accommodated a range of humanities disciplines and found common ground between them. The benefits of sharing knowledge and expertise not just within small consortia but with the sector as a whole—of extending the principles behind open-access publication beyond the research outputs themselves to include the methods by which they are published—would also be enormous. Commercial publishers have a clear imperative to keep private those aspects of their work that give them an advantage over their rivals. This need not be the case where publishers are learned societies, or libraries, or universities. There is room for many business models, for many ways of publishing, and for many kinds of publisher. Equally, there is space for many and varied forms of publication. Some of this activity will remain on a purely commercial footing, some will be conducted on a not-for-profit basis, and some may never cover its costs but be viewed rather as an investment in organizational reputation. It is a time to experiment, and it would be a missed opportunity for learned societies not to rise to the challenge.

Notes

1. Julie McDougall-Waters, Aileen Fyfe, and Noah Moxham, *Philosophical Transactions: 350 Years of Publishing at the Royal Society (1665–2015)* (London: The Royal Society, 2014).
2. It is not, however, the service that is most valued by members of learned societies. Mary Waltham, for example, notes that "Numerous surveys show that the primary reason for being a member of a society is for the opportunities that membership brings for conferences, networking and collaboration." Mary Waltham, "What Do Society and Association Members Really Want?," *Learned Publishing* 21, no. 1 (2008): 7–14, <https://doi.org/10.1087/095315108X247294>. I owe this reference to one of the anonymous reviewers for this book.

3. The “threat” was not, of course, a sudden one, but humanities researchers in the UK were undoubtedly taken by surprise by the open-access mandates that emerged first from Research Councils UK (RCUK) and then the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

4. In Europe, the announcement of “Plan S” in September 2018 raised the alarm once again. Ninth among the 10 principles of Plan S is the statement that “The ‘hybrid’ model of publishing is not compliant” with the view of open access set out by the European Commission and a number of other national research funders, including UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It is precisely this hybrid model of journal publishing, offering a mixture of subscription-based and open access, that minimized the disruption experienced by publishers (but did not deliver a full open-access publishing landscape). cOAlition S, “Plan S,” Plan S and cOAlition S, 2018, <https://www.coalition-s.org/>.

5. The Research Excellence Framework is “the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions.” Higher Education Funding Council for England, “REF 2021,” Research Excellence Framework, 2019, <https://www.ref.ac.uk>.

6. Higher Education Funding Council for England, “FAQs—REF 2021,” Research Excellence Framework, 2019, <https://www.ref.ac.uk/faqs/>.

7. Geoffrey Crossick, “Monographs and Open Access: A Report for the Higher Education Funding Council for England,” 21–22, noted, for example, that “the decline in monograph publishing turns out to be a myth,” citing an almost 100 percent increase in the number of monographs published annually by four major publishers between 2004 and 2013.

8. Higher Education Funding Council for England, “Consultation on the Second Research Excellence Framework,” 2. “In the long term ... we want to see the benefits that open access has brought to journal articles extended to other research outputs, including monographs. We therefore intend to move towards an open-access requirement for monographs in the exercise that follows the next REF (expected in the mid-2020s).”

9. Even Plan S, with its original ambitious target of 2020 for most kinds of publication, acknowledged that “the timeline to achieve Open Access for monographs and books may be longer than 1 January 2020,” and this has indeed turned out to be the case. cOAlition S, “Plan S.”

10. I am grateful to Martin Paul Eve for his advice on this list.

11. The series is also supported by the Economic History Society and the Past and Present Society, and published in association with the Institute of Historical Research, University of London.

